

# Concept and Practice of Effectiveness in Autonomism: From *Autonomia* and *Autonomen* to Contemporary Movements

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## ABSTRACT

Autonomist politics have been prominent in social movements around the world for at least half a century. Critics of autonomism often acknowledge its mobilising successes, but point out its inability or unwillingness to bridge the gap between the initial protest waves and sustainable counter-hegemonic institutions, seeing autonomism as ineffective in the long term. Motivated by this critical trend, I aim to draw an outline of the complicated autonomist relation to the concept of political effectiveness. Influential Italian and German movements of the 1960s–1980s are chosen as a starting point. Analysis of the critique of alleged autonomist ineffectiveness, combined with an overview of autonomist experience and achievements from the late twentieth century to the movements of the 2010s, shows a peculiar and paradoxical nature of this relation.

**Keywords:** *autonomism, class politics, political effectiveness, political mobilisation, social movements*

## INTRODUCTION

The influence of autonomism to contemporary politics is undeniable and its legacy is impossible to avoid. In the past several decades, this has been most visible in popular social movements and anti-authoritarian extra-parliamentary leftist formations around the world: from the ‘Battle of Seattle’ of 1999 to the

DOI:10.3898/AS.29.1.03

‘movements of the squares’ of the early 2010s and the ongoing Zapatista and Kurdish insurrections. As autonomist organisational methods continue to prove attractive and popular, especially among the younger generations, they also permeated or got incorporated into strategies and tactics of ‘traditional’ political organisations: parties, trade unions, NGOs. As George Katsiaficas put it, principles of autonomy have become ‘the phenomenal form of contemporary radical activism’ (Katsiaficas 2006, p9).

For all their influence, autonomist organisational practices receive a fair share of criticism from the left, including autonomists themselves. A good part of this criticism is based on the assumption that, while autonomist emphases on diversity, intersectionality, decentralisation, direct involvement, and horizontalism are initially attractive and successful at spectacular bursts of mobilisation, in the long term, autonomist organisations are *ineffective* in creating lasting popular engagement and cannot pose a serious and sustainable challenge to the status quo (see, among others, Adamovsky 2006; Kalb 2014, p 116; Decreus et al. 2014, pp136-137; Mouffe 2013, p77; Miettunen 2015, p44; Nineham 2006; Katsiaficas 2006, pp104-105).

It must be taken into account, however, that very few of autonomism’s critics completely distance themselves from social movements or other prominent political formations organised along principles of autonomy. Most of them take an active part in or at least recognise the importance and timeliness of the political formations that they criticise. Which means that this, mostly ‘insider’, critique does not propose an ‘either-or’ choice – either complete rejection or unconditional support of autonomism – but, instead, a possibility of meaningful discussion and reflection that could benefit and improve autonomist-based politics. This paper hopes to add to such discussion by concentrating on one of the conceptual points where these analyses differ most – *effectiveness* – and trying to see how this concept is understood in theory by both critics and proponents, and how it is expressed in autonomist practice.

The problem of political effectiveness (‘outcome’, ‘success’, ‘achievement’, ‘impact’, etc.) has been somewhat researched in social movement studies, but remains among the least popular topics in the field (Amenta & Young 1999; Miettunen 2015, pp69-71). Most academic social movements research is more occupied with moments and methods of mobilisation and activity than with legacy and sustainability (Amenta & Young 1999, p22). And when they are, analysing the latter presents a conceptual and methodological challenge as, among other things, measuring effectiveness requires separating the impact of movements from that of other social and political forces, and evaluating sustain-

ability requires taking into account movement transformations (including ephemeral ones) and non-material effects that certain movements have on ideological convictions of both their participants and broader society (see, among others: Tarrow 2011, pp215-233; Earl 2004; Giugni 1998). As argued below, social movement studies' approach to effectiveness has limited application in the particular case of autonomist and autonomist-leaning movements; effectiveness of autonomist politics must be conceptualised in the joint framework of its political ambition and social impact.

There is another challenge: that of defining 'autonomism' and delineating or deliberately choosing its expressions. As largely agreed by both participants and observers of autonomist movements, according to their key principles of self-determination and non-centralisation, autonomy and autonomism cannot have one overarching definition and are better defined not by a theoretical framework but by political tactics and practical actions (Lotringer & Marrazi 1980, p8; Katsiaficas 2006, pp6-8; Böhm et al. 2010, p19). The movements that are considered autonomist or autonomist-leaning are spread throughout different time periods and geographic locations and vary significantly by adapting to and incorporating these local and temporal differences into their respective *modi operandi*. This diversity has its problems: especially among contemporary movements, when there is a lack of clear self-identification as 'autonomist', continuity of the autonomist tradition may show signs of self-mythologisation; however, as argued below, it can be quite clearly glimpsed at on conceptual and practical levels.

In an attempt to stay at least somewhat faithful to these principles and the understanding that autonomism never existed as one unit or graspable totality, this paper must admit a limited scope. Insights from researches on more contemporary movements, say, Indignados or Occupy, will be used, but the historical emphasis will mainly fall on the concepts and methods worked out by Italian *Autonomia* and German *Autonomen*. While it does not make much sense to talk about the 'roots' of autonomism, *Autonomia* is for sure one of the most prominent 'stems' in its rhizomatic basis: Italian autonomism of the 1960s–1970s was groundbreaking in the scope of its mobilisation, as well as concepts introduced and entrenched, and ability to involve and mobilise various social groups. German *Autonomen* were both, in many ways, legacy-bearers of the Italian movement, and a major influence in the 'rebirth' of autonomism in various corners of the world in the late 1990s–early 2010s (Katsiaficas 2006, p16; Geronimo 2012, p74; Martín Alcoff & Alcoff 2015, p225; Cuninghame 2010, p457; O'Banion 2017).

## ITALIAN AND GERMAN AUTONOMISMS AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY 'CONTINUATIONS'

Modern Western European autonomism as we know it developed in Western Europe in the 1950s-1980s, or 'the long year of 1968' (O'Banion 2017). Seen in its prolonged totality and from different points of view, several overlapping sets of conditions and forces can be found behind changes in 'traditional' leftist strategies and tactics. Economically, technological advances and the onset of globalisation meant that workers in the factories could be replaced more easily; traditional means of struggle and party organisations were becoming less effective; with consumption reaching new heights, wage raises hard-won in the factory could be easily lost through growing costs of living (Ryan 1991; Katsiaficas 2006). In parliamentary and trade union politics, Communist parties and their trade union affiliates adopted tactics of compromise, trying to hold onto state power to the point where more and more workers started to feel that they are no longer represented by these traditional political organisations (Katsiaficas 2006, pp23-25, 42; Geronimo 2012, p40; Cuninghame 2002, p202). Culturally, multiple underprivileged social groups – unemployed youths and students, LGBTQ\*, women, migrants, etc. – found themselves gravely underrepresented in the traditional leftist politics centred around the notion of the autochthonous white male 'proletariat'; later on, these groups would come to play crucial roles in the new mass social movements (Cuninghame 2002, pp201-202).

One of the main precursors of modern European autonomism, *operaismo* (workerism) appeared and developed in Italy. This was a new Marxist current that analysed the capitalist mode of production by prioritising 'living' working class action as opposed to the 'dead labour' of capital, the mainstay of traditional Marxist theory. Its theoretical foundations soon spread to the neighbouring countries, especially France and Germany. Paradoxically, as Steve Wright observes, the process of 'geographical expansion in theoretical reflection and research marked by some kind of *operaista* perspective' gained momentum as a consequence of the Italian state repressions in 1979, when most prominent *operaist* intellectuals and activists were either imprisoned or forced to flee the country (Wright 2008, p131). The Italian 1970s were also marked by a diversification of struggles: breaking with the tradition of factory centrality, and partly with *operaismo*, its rhizomatic successor *Autonomia* became 'a heterogeneous, localist movement [...] united only in its identification with the theory and practice of autonomy from the State, institutional political parties and trade unions or any form of political, social and cultural mediation between the inter-

ests of capital and those of the proletarian social actors of which it was composed' (Cunningham 2002, p2)

The German *Autonomen*, highly influenced by Italian *Autonomia* (Katsiaficas 2006, pp65-66, 274-275; Geronimo 2012, p74; Cunningham 2002, p205) and, in turn, highly influential in European radical politics in the late 1970s - early 1990s, took this diversification even further, not only breaking with the centrality of factory and proletarian identity, but also pushing these categories to secondary importance, concentrating rather on the 'decolonization of everyday life': fighting against the domination of commodity form in various 'previously private' sectors of life and the social destruction brought by it (Katsiaficas 2006, p244). To be sure, refusal of work and other one-sided breaches of the social contract between the workers and the capital were among the tactics of Italian *operaists* and autonomists, as well (Cunningham 2002, p200); and German autonomists' rejection of organising the workplaces only came after quite a few unsuccessful attempts to intervene in the factories (Geronimo 2012, p124). Nevertheless, given that West Germany in the 1970s-1980s was a functioning welfare state that provided its citizens with a certain standard of employment and social security, the *Autonomen* could not (and would not) build a 'proletarian' movement (Katsiaficas 2006, pp80-81). On the other hand, the autonomous women's movements in Italy and Germany were also responsible for much of the shift from workerist consciousness to 'politics of the first person', 'both because of feminists' innovative internal procedures' and 'their capacity to act separately from men in accordance with their own autonomously defined needs and aspirations' (ibid., p7). Through the convergence of these important factors, German autonomism appeared as a radical break with the tradition and discourse of labour centrality and a proliferation of struggles in varying social, economic, and cultural fields.

The proliferation of loci of struggles, of course, cannot be ascribed to any one or two political currents: in the past as well as today, various Marxist, anarchist, feminist, anti-colonialist currents and movements would take up and lead organising around issues of housing, living costs, ecology, sexuality, etc. However, in the past thirty years, the demand of autonomy in both means and aims – as Böhm et al. put it, autonomy from 'capital, the state, [and globalist models of] development' (Böhm et al. 2010, p23) – has been reverberating in many of the most prominent and promising of these loci: European anti-nuclear movements, peasant revolts in South America, the global justice movement and its massive protests against the G8, G20, IMF, and WTO summits, the 'movements of the squares' from Seoul to Cairo and New York, in intersectionalist feminist currents, squatters' and tenants' movements, etc.

This does not amount to saying that there is a clear continuity between the Italian and German autonomisms of the 1970s-1980s and the movements that exhibited autonomous tendencies in the 2010s. It is, however, safe to say that there are very conscious commonalities between them, at least in the movements that are geographically and culturally closer to Western Europe, such as Occupy or the Spanish Indignados. In Felix Guattari's terms, there is a conceptual, theoretical, strategic, and practical 'rebuilding of solidarities across time and space' (quoted in Vasudevan 2015, p328). The most obvious is the aforementioned proliferation of the loci of struggles or a move from the 'theater of production' to the 'theater of distribution' (Squibb 2015), including the machinery of public space occupation and building alternative infrastructures of movement's sustainability (Vasudevan 2015, p318). These are demonstrations of certain strategic continuity: the strategy of refusal and the strategy of commons.

A good example here is Occupy's refusal to present a list of demands and its expansion on the notion of commons. The refusal to deliver demands, which in the US first sprung up in university occupations and the students' slogan 'We are the crisis', builds on 'the resonance of *Operaismo*'s insight that capital is reactive to and attempts to colonise the working class's own historical dynamism and modes of social organisation, that crises in capital are crises of capital's control over workers' autonomy' (Schwartz-Weinstein 2012). In other words, the autonomist element here is the refusal both to narrow the scope of struggle by picking only a certain sector of the life-world in which to struggle (here, university or higher education) and to deliver the commonly held power of the workers (or students) to the hands of an existent capitalist or state institution. The idea of commons – 'spaces and things that are controlled neither by capital nor the state, but rather shared, available to and for all' (ibid.) – coherently conceptualised in the Italian workerist and autonomist tradition, was expanded by Occupy from something pre-existent and to be defended to something that could also 'be produced – water as commons, city as commons, and indeed education as commons, or as something that has never been a commons but perhaps should and could be made one through struggle' (ibid.). This theoretical continuation is also evidenced by the abundance of interest in Italian autonomism among the Occupy participants – at least those in the privileged position to engage in this interest, i.e., students and other educated workers – via reading groups, (re)conceptualisations, and organisational practices.

Continuity of autonomist tendencies in 'actual' time and space is, naturally, much harder to grasp. One of the ways to do this is to look into organisational practices. In her research on the Spanish Indignados movement, Cristina Flesher Fominaya argues that the perception of spectacular mass mobilisations as radically

new and spontaneous is in some ways beneficial to the movements themselves, but that it tends to overlook social movement history, their continuous learning processes, and ‘the long marches’, i.e. tireless behind-the-scenes work of various local groups. In the case of Indignados, she concludes, there would not have been, among other things, the mass general assemblies in the squares (sometimes of up to 5,000 participants), had it not been for thirty years of local autonomous organising, inspired by previous Spanish and European movements (Flesher Fominaya 2014). Among the tactics and practices that prepared the ground for mass assemblies of Indignados, she names ‘[a]n autonomous anti-capitalist *Okupa* (squatters) movement [that] flourished in Madrid from 1985–1999, as did the Free Radio movement [...] During this period, the local groups that were coordinated within the Autónoma struggle were highly reflexive and engaged in deliberative practices while at the same time being some of earliest to mobilise against precarious labour’ (ibid., pp11–12). It is important to notice the parallel: the same organisational practices were prominent in Italy in the 1970s and Germany in the 1980s.

Both researchers and participants of the early 2010s movements also name the anti-globalisation (or Global Justice) movement’s experiences and practices as foundations for these new movements (ibid.; Vasudevan 2015, pp317, 328; Squibb 2015). Hence, spectacular mobilisations and literal *mass* movements (not only aimed at the ‘masses’, but actually involving them) could be seen as visible stepping stones on the much murkier path of localised and smaller-scale organising. In geographically and culturally related contexts, these lead us, via the late 1990s–early 2000s anti-globalisation movements, back to the aforementioned European ‘long year of 1968’.

Despite all the influence and continuity, there is one core difference between the Italian and German autonomisms and the more contemporary movements of the 2010s: their approach and demands to the existing capitalist and state institutions. *Autonomia* and *Autonomen* rejected almost any involvement or cooperation with the existing structures, including democracy, welfare state, formally organised labour, and Communist and Socialist parties. Instead they aimed to create their own autonomous institutions and infrastructural networks. Movements like Occupy and Indignados, on the other hand, despite their acts of disobedience and defiance, mostly took a different approach. Their agenda was to radically change the existing institutions, including universities, participatory democracy, and even the banking sector by demanding that they open up to radical mass participation – and thus forcing them to fulfil the impossible ‘democratic’ promises that purportedly legitimise them (see Flesher Fominaya 2014, pp153–154; Squibb 2015). Such strategy, on the one hand, allowed these movements, when needed, to use the resources that were largely unavailable to Italian and German autonomists: that of

‘party-affiliated organized labor’ (ibid.) and ‘progressive’ democratic institutions (including NGOs, news media, student bodies etc.). On the other hand, it could be seen not as willingness to give up autonomy, but rather as conscious unwillingness to limit accessibility to the movements in times of unclear or shifting class composition, when the symbolic function of identity- and unity-building is especially important. The important notion here – well understood by the movements themselves – was that it was impossible for the existing institutions to meet these demands of radical participation without either collapsing under their own weight or becoming institutions of an entirely different kind: people’s institutions, effectively autonomous from the state and capital.

Taking all of this into account, it is safe to conclude that, contrary to being outdated or forgotten, concepts, analyses, and, most of all, practices worked out by Italian and German autonomism are important to contemporary social movements and progressive politics. Here, it is also important to note that the interrupted tradition of autonomism and autonomist tendencies extends not only to the future from the 1960s-1980s and not only to West Europe and North America. Various authors point to different directions of historical movements that may not have self-identified as autonomists but can be and are seen as inspirations and part of their tradition by autonomous movements: American Wobblies (IWW), Hungarian and German council communisms of the early twentieth century (Cunningham 2010, p454; Milburn 2019, p29), autonomous struggle of Black people and women in the US and the Caribbean in the 1960s (James 2012, p44), movements in Mexico and Argentina in the 1990s (Martin Alcoff & Alcoff 2015, p225), etc. All in all, in accordance with the spirit of autonomy, autonomism became a force to reckon with by the virtue of fusion of many diverse experiences, including those of varying geographical context, and, indeed, should not be reduced to a unilinear Eurocentric affair.

## CRITIQUE OF AUTONOMIST (IN)EFFECTIVENESS

The classical take on movement effectiveness (‘success’, etc.) in social movement studies is based on William A. Gamson’s scheme of movements’ influence, where they can gain ‘acceptance’ (becoming ‘a valid spokesman [sic] for a legitimate set of interests’) and/or ‘new advantages’ (gained during the challenge and/or its aftermath) from the ‘system’, meaning the political mainstream (Gamson 1990, pp28-29). Rochon and Mazmanian supplemented this system with a third category of changing social values, emphasising the movements’ ability not only to address the political problems of the time but also to change the perception of what



the political problems of the time *are*, thus redefining the political agenda itself (Rochon and Mazmanian 1993). In general, the field of social movement studies tends to steer clear of ‘big words’ like ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of movements and rather focus on their ‘consequences’ and ‘impacts’ (Amenta and Caren 2004). The latter can be of several sorts, including organisational and cultural – from beliefs and discourses to subcultures, music, and children’s literature – (Earl 2004), or material and social ‘collective goods’ for movement participants and the broader groups that they represent – positive lifestyle changes, rises of cultural groups, built identities and possibilities for expression etc. – (Tarrow 2011, pp215-220).

While social movement studies can provide a framework for assessing and criticising effectiveness of autonomist politics, the very breadth of this framework does little justice to the specific political project of autonomism. Whereas the definition of a ‘social movement’ is very inclusive, autonomists, as mentioned above, have always used the strategies of refusal to distinguish and detach themselves from political bodies and movements that (allegedly) impede their progress and encroach on their autonomy. A fusion of diverse currents and experiences, autonomism also has little patience to a view from ‘the outside’, and even less when it comes from academia (see, for example, Kostka and Czarnotta 2017; Dadusc 2014), and naturally would not stand for clear delineation of its limits as a set of fragmented ‘social movements’. While impact on and partial victories against the political mainstream are acknowledged, the ambition of autonomism, as seen above and will be seen below, is surely leaning towards ‘success’ or ‘failure’. It is safe to say that past and contemporary autonomist movements strive for something *more* than a political revolution as an overthrow and replacement of government(s). Their aim is a prolonged prefigurative social revolution that would change the way the society works from the bottom and would start this process from the very moment of its inception (Miettunen 2015, p23). This provides for an interesting context: on the one hand, openly declared grand goals and revolutionary slogans must carry an implicit understanding that, most probably, only a small part of what is strived for will be actually achieved as legal and economic changes; at the same time, when set against this background, ‘acceptance’ by or ‘new advantages’ from the ‘system’, and even a ‘change in social values’, appear as laughable goals. Therefore, while the attitude of impact on the political mainstream and – especially – on political culture can be of use, the preferred gaze should be that of participants and scholars of autonomist movements rather than of established social movement researchers.

Summarising the self-proclaimed aims, achievements, and aftermath of Italian *Autonomia*, Cuninghame leads to pessimistic conclusions (Cuninghame 2002, pp204-209). Having misjudged the political climate in Italy in the 1970s, as well

as its own revolutionary capacity, *Autonomia* was successfully dispersed by state repression and failed to reach any of its self-proclaimed aims. The post-capitalist society based on workers' autonomy that would skip the elements of a vanguard party and transitional socialist state did not come into being, not even in the provisional form of separate 'liberated zones of communist counter-power' (ibid, p207). Established alternative spaces of socialisation outside labour and family relations were too few to cater for the needs of precarious youth, leaving most of them to 'desperate[ly] search for individual solutions to the crisis of the movements, some through heroin addiction or neo-mysticism, some through "repentance" or "disassociation", some tragically through suicide, most through the return to the "normality" of private life and the psychological "removal" of their transgressive past' (ibid., pp208-209).

Immense socio-political changes obviously require a lot of time, concerted effort, popular support, and an outstanding ability to feel the ebb and flow of the general political atmosphere. *Autonomia* had to learn the hard way that, as Wright put it, 'however tempting, or even seemingly necessary as a way to forestall capital's efforts to divide the class still further, efforts to "force the pace" of class struggle on the part of militants always end in disaster' (Wright 2018). It is extremely hard and complicated to engage in an effective struggle not only against capital, patriarchy, and/or colonialism, but also against the state, with its huge arsenal of tools of repression, while at the same time refusing the traditional structural forms that rely on the state for their legitimacy. When the process is 'forced', when attacks against the state are carried out without sufficient popular support, such movements become targets of harsh state repression and are forced to devote most of their energy to solidarity work and mere survival, further continuing to isolate themselves from the rest of society, slowly losing whatever limited popular support and political effectiveness they had (Katsiaficas 2006, pp51-52; Geronimo 2012, p71; O'Bannion 2017).

Chantal Mouffe tackles another aspect of autonomist ineffectiveness: according to her, autonomist and post-autonomist movements are expert in experimenting with new forms of political participation, opening up unexpected political spaces (as best seen in the 'movements of the squares'), and creating new symbolic identities, but, having successfully made the first step of negating the hegemonic status quo, fail to engage in the second step of 're-articulation': establishing a meaningful substitute for the contested hegemony (Mouffe 2013, p73). In the 1960s-1980s and now, this failure is ascribed to weak structural links between the participants of these movements, justified by the need to reject old-school political identities and remain inclusive to almost any subjectivity (as best

seen in the Occupy slogan 'We are the 99%'). The adverse effects of this may be a frustratingly stalling political programme, always coming back to the starting point in order to 'orient' the new participants to the basic principles of a given organisation (Katsiaficas 2006, p72), or simple volatility of the movement which belongs to everyone but also to no one in particular, and can disperse as easily as it has gathered (Decreus et al. 2014, p139). According to Mouffe, autonomist political experiments should be held accountable for their failures to re-articulate and replace the hegemonic discourse, as opening the ends and then abandoning the project by leaving it to 'the general public' or 'the multitude' may lead to a 'chaotic situation of pure dissemination, leaving the door open for attempts at rearticulation by non-progressive forces' (Mouffe 2013, p73), for example, far-right parties or xenophobic 'grassroots movements'.

However, the main issue with autonomist discursive re-articulation seems to be not that it is lacking, but rather its scope and that it can only fully unravel when certain conditions are met. As demonstrated by abundance of squats, social centres, counter-cultural activities, and even alternative forms of family life and employment, instead of re-articulating 'broader society', autonomist politics are quite successful in creating a discourse and a 'society' of their own, including social support networks that can sustain and cater for quite a number of people. For example, the number of squatted buildings in Italy between 1969 and 1975 is estimated to have reached twenty thousand (Katsiaficas 2006, p41) and, in 1979, around a hundred thousand West-Berliners reported their involvement in alternative cultural and economic projects (Geronimo 2012, p74). Nevertheless, such 'underground' re-articulations and sustenance networks are often established at the expense of openness to those 'outside' the movement's loose confines and sometimes become obstacles for the movement to spread effectively. In his insider's history of the German *Autonomen*, Geronimo provides an interesting analysis of why autonomist attempts to employ themselves in local factories and organise (with) the workers were a failure: 'The fact that Autonomen could always retreat and survive within their own structures distinguished them from other workers. Workplace organizing on the one hand, and the defence of independent structures (a 'scene') on the other, proved to be a contradiction that the activists could not solve' (Geronimo 2012, p124) In a general situation where the established, unionised, comparatively well-to-do workers cannot be seduced by something as ephemeral as 'self-determination', and the worse-off 'mobile' (i.e., precarious) labour prefers to change job than fight for better conditions, especially when the economy allows for such mobility, alternative material support networks become a dividing and not a unifying factor. Furthermore, the comfort of the 'safety nets'

of these alternative networks were also one of the reasons why autonomists, taking their own anti-capitalist commitment as standard, were likely to overestimate the revolutionary preparedness of the rest of the population, and easily wrote off those who had concerns about the pragmatics of their radical programme as ‘reformist’ (Pizzolato 2017, p462).

On the other hand, when alternative support networks fail or appear to be insufficient, the effectiveness of autonomist organising is questioned by those very much involved in the ‘scene’, as well. Breaking with the ‘old’ forms of organising attached to certain established institutions or localities (factory, university, party, union etc.) and moving towards horizontal networks, ‘politics of the first person’, and new symbolic identities, open up a gap between the not-anymore and the not-yet, the bridging of which requires an analysis of personal and collective motivation to get and stay involved in such movements. According to Wright, ‘there needs to be a better understanding of the role of politically-motivated minorities within class politics’, and not only from the psychological aspect (including that of ‘revolutionary consciousness’) or by deducing which organisational practices best sustain the motivation of ‘militants’, but also and foremost by taking into account the material conditions and social conflicts that establish and group this ‘minority’ and keep it going (Wright 2018). Indeed, autonomism relies on ‘militants’, ‘scene’, and spontaneous proliferation of initiatives for its effectiveness so much that it could be compared to the traditional Communist parties’ reliance on ‘the proletariat’: here, among other crucial differences, instead of the slumbering majority, we have a very active minority as the main political actor. And when the needs of this active minority are not met (and lack of proper material analysis can be one of the reasons of such failure), as Mabel Thwaites Rey notices, quite often movements ‘d[o] not die out having been attacked by the state but simply because people actually choose to leave due to the quality of life being much better elsewhere’ (quoted in Miettunen 2015, p44).

Combining the effects of such retreats from autonomist movements with their often unresolved open-endedness, other critics of autonomist ineffectiveness point out that when the movements stop in their tracks at the point of disarticulation and/or fail to cater for their participants, the task of re-articulation is taken up mostly not by ‘non-progressive forces’, but by structures of capital, which manage to reform themselves and become even more effective, adaptive, and inclusive of the newly ‘discovered’ identities. Indeed, as noticed by Katsiaficas, in some cases, the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’, as well as the autonomist principle of first-person politics, can be ‘turned on [their] head[s] – to the point where the political [is] irrelevant’ (Katsiaficas 2006, p79), limiting the use of previously

ambitious models and practices that grew out of collective experimentation and experience to individualist soul-searching in small groups of friends and lovers and/or creating subjectivities suitable to the 'new spirit of capitalism'. By tiring out the movements' participants with repression on the one hand and presenting to them attractive legal opportunities (e.g., legalised housing projects; promising careers in NGOs, academia, or political parties) on the other, the movements are drained, isolated, and slowly become self-fulfilling prophecies of 'play time' for rebellious youths before they take up comfortable positions in the state and capital apparatuses (ibid., pp104-105). In their intensive meta-study of the demands and meaning of autonomy, Böhm et al. place autonomy and autonomism in the paradoxical position between possibility and impossibility: according to them, autonomy is '[i]mpossible, because the practice of autonomy is bound up with the "new spirit of capitalism", emphasizing autonomous and flexible forms of economic organization, including the increasing incorporation of social movement activities into the neoliberal service provisions of the state. In this way, autonomous movements must be seen as part of the hegemonic system of capital and the state' (Böhm et al. 2010, p18). This is, of course, only part of the general picture, and reducing the meaning and effect of autonomist movements to inadvertently serving the capital or the cult of the ego is precisely not what the authors of this criticism had in mind. However, it allows us to see the problem of autonomist effectiveness from a dialectical point of view: born out of the contradictions of rapidly changing capitalism, the grassroots movements that oppose it may be so effective in providing provisional solutions to these contradictions that they are inevitably incorporated back into capital's overarching logic.

## UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING EFFECTIVENESS OF AUTONOMISM

Coming back to the classical understanding of social movements' effectiveness as 'acceptance', 'new advantages', and 'changing social values', in recent years autonomism could mostly boast of the latter two. However, the 'new advantages' were not entirely new: in the face of neoliberal reforms, autonomism, especially in Italy and Germany, has contributed to preserving previously won social advantages rather than obtaining new ones. According to Cuninghame, '[t]he strength of the resistance to and consequent slowness in the introduction of neoliberal economic and social reforms in contemporary Italy, when compared to the UK and the USA, can be explained, at least partially, by the continuing existence of a very radical working class political culture linked to the experience of the AWM (Autonomous Workers' Movement)' (Cuninghame 2002, p94). The German *Autonomen*, among other

things, are credited with multiple successful single-issue campaigns in the 1980s that effectively stood in the way of the West German state's plans, for example, 'stopping the construction of a nuclear reprocessing plant at Wackersdorf in Bavaria that would have provided Germany with bomb-grade plutonium ... , caus[ing] the government to cancel a national census, and help[ing] undermine Berlin's bid to host the Olympics in 2000' (Katsiaficas 2006, p20). In the broader scheme of things, in the epicentres of the movement (such as West Berlin in the 1980s) as well as all over West Germany, the formal political culture was forced to shift its emphasis towards issues important to the *Autonomen*, such as material conditions of the youth, housing, and ecology (ibid., pp97-100). To sum them up, the very real effects of Italian and German autonomist movements were three-fold: they forced the powers-to-be to amend their policies and pay immediate attention to social and economical problems of various underprivileged groups (precarious youth, women, migrants, homeless, etc.); by single-issue campaigns and public disobedience actions, they managed to involve these previously 'unseen' groups into public politics; and, by creating relations between different campaigns and bringing various social groups together, they established a broad political analysis emphasising links between different struggles.

However important these achievements may be, one must also consider the major self-defined aims that were non-achieved – if not in the Italian and the German groups, then at least in contemporary autonomist-leaning movements. Here, the clear distinction between emancipation (different subjectivities taking active part in work and public life as equals) and liberation (radical transformation of the everyday by blurring the subjective limits and changing the notions of 'work' and 'public life') has always been important (ibid., p45); as well as the opposition between taking power from the state or capital and building its 'authentic' leader-less version from the bottom up (Miettunen 2015, p41). It could be said that the only effectiveness truly desired by autonomists is effectiveness 'of the second degree': not only to achieve real material social change, but also to achieve it prefiguratively, in a manner that does not contradict its essence, and push it past the commonly agreed limits. On the one hand, as noticed by Ezequiel Adamovsky, prefigurative action can be more effective in the current situation, where the current economic and political system relies on vast global interdependence of social actors: without a promise of alternative structures that could replace the capitalist ones, the public is understandably reluctant to get involved in anti-capitalist struggles because of fear of chaos and disorder (Adamovsky 2006). On the other hand, such understanding of effectiveness is inevitably dialectical and in constant 'antagonistic tension between positive forces of creation and negative dialectical

challenge involved with autonomy' (Böhm et al. 2010, p27) Failure and success here are blurred, most of the time co-existent, and rarely captured by official summaries of existing institutions. Decreus et al. provide a paradoxical example of the effectiveness of the 'autonomist' and 'anarchist' (in reality, both to a certain degree) social movements as compared to a clearly structurally organised and Communist-party affiliated Chilean student movement of the early 2010s:

Compared to the Chilean movement, Occupy and the Indignados were indeed institutionally rather ineffective. Yet, again in contrast to the Chilean case, their symbolic effectiveness was huge. All over the world, people identified with the new protest movements, and started to camp in squares and public places. Occupy thus sparked a global wave of actions and initiatives and was capable of symbolically constructing a point of identification for a global audience. The movement was able to stir the passions of a large number of people all over the world, and made it possible for them to imagine they were part of the same global movement (Decreus et al. 2014, p140).

The element of effectiveness here is very broad and important, as it concerns an ideological shift at the lowest, most disorganised level ('people all over the world'). Keir Milburn, for one, argues that the international wave of protests and revolutions of 2011, in which these movements and their organisational practices played a major role, provided grounds for the current generational political gap: a worldwide spike in young people's interest in and engagement with left-wing politics of both electoral and extra-parliamentary forms. In his view, the 2011 uprisings were an 'active event' that followed the 'passive event' of the 2008 financial crisis – whereas the latter event and its management left many destitute and powerless, the former was among the 'events which their participants experience as something that they have actively constructed with others. This tends to cause an expansion of social and political possibility' (Milburn 2019, p58). Such expansion of possibility was especially necessary after decades of systematic neoliberal 'consciousness deflation' – another reversal, this time of 'changing social values': a return of social values as an act of resistance. 'Consciousness deflation' (term borrowed from Mark Fisher) stands for a process that is the opposite of consciousness raising, a practice that was popular among autonomist (and not only) feminists in the 1970s: the construction of a collective subject from a fragmented mass of common struggles, sufferings, and antagonisms by sharing common experiences. The reversal of this process requires institutionalised individualisation and fragmentation of people's struggles and hardships: 'The institutions we interact with on a daily basis are continually

tweaked to ensure they reward ruthlessly competitive, selfish and self-promoting behaviour while penalising those who behave in other ways. Through repetition we internalize this institutional logic, come to anticipate it and act accordingly. It eventually becomes the common-sense view of what human beings are “really” like’ (ibid., p49).

From this point of view, this ‘stirring [of] the passions’ is much more tangible than it may appear at the first glance: alleged ‘spontaneity’ is revealed to be a timely counterattack on the symbolical field, which is very closely related to and supported by material realities. Collective consciousness-raising, or at least resistance to its deflation, seems as necessary and fruitful nowadays as it was in the 1970s. However, this time it shows up more in open general assemblies than in premeditated group practices. On the one hand, this could be explained by group practices having also been somewhat seized by the same individualising institutions and moved behind closed doors as specialised paid services. On the other, in absence of collectivised subjectivities as points of contact, the array of possible dissatisfactions and demands is simply too broad and chaotic. Here, structural and methodological approaches used by Occupy and similar movements may indeed be the most effective way to frame this diversity of struggles in a collective manner. Whereas those in favour of organised-labour centrality may accuse autonomism and autonomist-influenced movements of further obscuring labour and class politics and inadvertently supporting the ‘post-political’ paradigm, both fairly (1960s-1980s) and very recent (2010s) history demonstrates that autonomists have, on the contrary, been very effective in expanding the notions of labour and class to sectors where these aspects usually go unnoticed, keeping them alive and playing a crucial part in the process, the aim of which is for ‘the class struggle to cease to be proletarian’ (Wright 2008, p130).

Another difficult task is assessing autonomist movements’ effectiveness in their relation to formal organisations, including trade unions, NGOs, and political parties. Due to the decentralised nature and blurry ‘borders’ of the movements, schematics of these relations are constantly shifting and can entail alliances, harsh critique, and outright rejection in various combinations, sometimes even a combination of all three at the same time. Also, there are usually heated debates inside and outside the movements on the effectiveness of their (dis)continuity when the initial mobilisation (sometimes lasting years) and organisational form is suppressed and/or dies out – or even before. Should autonomist informality and decentralisation be viewed only as an initial stage towards more ‘graspable’ and ‘effective’ forms of organisation? Or does it go against and defeat the internal logic of such movements? Is it true that, as argued by Juuso Miettunen, ‘[f]or a movement that calls



itself autonomous becoming part of the system that the movement opposes is the opposite of success' (Miettunen 2015, p70)?

The first notion to abandon here as counterproductive is that autonomists' harsh critique and rejection of traditional political structures are ideological whims with no material background. Historically, one needs only to remember that the Italian *Autonomia* openly, and sometimes physically, fought the Italian Communist Party and that the latter was one of the key players supporting repressions against the former (see, for example, Katsiaficas 2006, pp43-51); German *Autonomen* could also name at least several occasions where, for example, the Green Party with its tactics of non-violence and abiding the law directed the fury of law enforcement towards the movement (ibid., pp86-87, 179). More recently, electoral structures' numerous failures and betrayals of those who joined them from 'the long year of 2011' have also been obvious: from the inability of Syriza to resist Troika's master-plan on behalf of the Greek people in 2015 to the most recent willingness of conservative wings of American Democratic and British Labour parties to sabotage their own electoral campaigns just to keep the 'radicals' (i.e. social democrats) from taking the lead. No wonder, then, that structural decisions and 'real politics' of the parties, citizens' platforms, and trade unions have been criticised by autonomists as not representing the true interests of workers and other social groups, impeding revolutionary change, being defeatist, chauvinist, cowardly, life-draining, etc.

It is also no wonder, then, that many movements, including Italian *Autonomia* or Occupy, after suffering repression and/or exhausting their explosive energy, somewhat feed the new or old 'traditional' structures with militants, but largely either transform to other 'imperceptible' formations or disperse into various smaller groups. One of the often cited examples here is the anti-globalisation movement that burst onto the world scene with the successful blockade of the 1999 World Trade Organisation summit in Seattle and, according to Milburn, 'sparked a classic moment of excess in which summit protests, convergence camps and social forums spread around the world. However, the movement soon settled down into a yearly repetition of very similar events. This cadence could reproduce a movement, but it couldn't change the world' (Milburn 2019, p97). While endless repetition and reproduction of practices could justifiably be seen as signs of ineffectiveness, this sort of criticism risks presenting the demands that are too clear: namely that of the end of an autonomist/anarchist 'initial stage' and transformation into a centralised organisational form (perceived as able to 'change the world') that could be easily traceable to the original movement. In reality, large parts of such movements work according to a more temporally-sensitive internal logic that sees no tragedy in 'disappearing', at least on the most visible, spectacular level, to wait out the unfor-

tunate periods and mutate along with the changing economical and socio-political context (in classic terms, 'class composition') until another moment for meaningful mobilisation comes by.

However, quite many in the movements also see peaks in electoral cycles as such moments. Many formal political organisations have had at least part of their beginnings in autonomous mobilisations, from the decades-old German Green Party to 'new municipalist' parties and citizen platforms in Spain, Serbia, Poland, Hong Kong etc., to enlivened and expanding socialist wings of Democratic and Labour parties. For some (ex)autonomists, electoral cycles are attractive chances of politically engaging 'the broader public' when the material conditions for mass engagement are either not yet or no longer present (*ibid.*, p101). The effect that the alleged 'Generation Left' and current relationship between grassroots (including autonomist) movements and more 'traditional' political structures will have on the world is yet to be seen. But it does seem that the most exact (if not the only possible) way of assessing the effectiveness of historical Italian and German autonomist movements is to take the effect that these movements had on social reality together with that of parties, trade unions, and other, less radical, movements. To name a few examples: a strong Italian Communist party was also one of the conditions for the rise and potential of *Autonomia* (Geronimo 2012, p41); the positive effect of Italian autonomism on shortening the workweek, modernising housing and higher education, and improving the condition of women was only possible in the overall context of strong unions, workers' parties, and parliamentary political changes (Katsiaficas 2006, p57); partly as a result of the 1980-81 political crisis in West Berlin, where violent clashes between the squatters and authorities intermittently continued for months, progressive parties won noticeably more seats in the municipal bodies of Berlin and Hamburg, changing the landscape of local politics and instigating social policy changes (*ibid.*, pp91-100). On the one hand, this is neither surprising nor hypocritical, as dialectic relationship with existing institutions is not foreign to the spirit of autonomism, which clearly refuses to place the 'revolutionary potential' in any one social group, sector, or institution (including themselves). On the other hand, if understanding that material effectiveness of autonomism relies, in varying degree, on the non-autonomist actors around it, is employed by autonomists themselves, their fierce critique or rejection of traditional organisational structures becomes problematic by admitting the necessity of these structures to effective political struggle.

## CONCLUSIONS

A short inquiry into respective histories of Italian and German autonomist movements reveals their importance to the contemporary understanding of oppositional politics, as well as influence to recent and current political movements and mass mobilisations around the world. The claim that autonomism as a global phenomenon ‘started’ in Western Europe is rightly rejected; however, when discussing the successes and failures of contemporary autonomists, it is useful to investigate the most prominent European currents of autonomism as a significant part of the general picture.

Taken at a face value of their revolutionary slogans and actual achievements, autonomist movements of both past and (most probably) present can be seen as failures. We do not seem to be any closer to an egalitarian post-capitalist society where decentralised power would belong to those who built it from the bottom-up than we were in 1968. True, certain isolated examples of ‘liberated zones’, engaged in prefigurative attempts at such society, persist. However, these are too besieged and too few to cater even for all those who actively take part in autonomist praxis. The effect of this inability on the movement participants is disappointment and falling back on ‘normal’ individualistic strategies of survival. Some critics point out that such exodus from autonomist movements and the re-thinking opened up but not fully exploited by them have an effect that is directly opposite to the one desired: they provide additional resources for capitalist processes of reinvention and the discourse of individual ‘flexibility’, used to justify the neoliberal dismantling of social security systems.

On the other hand, outside of the desired prefigurative effectiveness ‘of the second degree’, autonomist movements sometimes prove very effective under the shape-shifting conditions of contemporary capitalism. They are successful in bringing public attention to various social issues that the centres of power would prefer to keep invisible; through ‘politics of the first person’, they involve those who are most directly hit by these social issues in meaningful political struggles, which often provide graspable material results. Furthermore, if ‘only’ on the ideological level, autonomism and autonomist-influenced movements have proven to be effective in (re)creating symbolical identities that can politically relate various underprivileged groups to one another; this is an important part of extending class politics outside the confines of ‘the proletariat’ and making them accessible to broader sectors of society. This line of practice relates, at least partly, autonomisms of the 1960s-1980s to current interest of the younger generations in various electoral and extra-parliamentary forms of left-wing politics.

A big part of autonomist effectiveness relies on their relation to non-autonomists, especially to social sectors traditionally at the 'centre' of class struggle, as well as the aforementioned 'traditional' political organisations (political parties, citizens' platforms, trade unions, NGOs, etc.). Indeed, the effectiveness of autonomist political formations as such can hardly be assessed at all without including them in the bigger picture of social forces, their adversities and alliances. Given how fierce the autonomists criticise and even reject outright traditional political institutions, this may appear paradoxical. However, it can also be argued that such embeddedness does not go against the internal logic of autonomy, which aims to build non-hierarchical popular power with multiple centres; is able to sacrifice, at least partly, temporary gains for long-lasting change in understanding of politics; and, finally, sees the potential of movement growth and broad inclusion, as opposed to ideological purity and isolation, as central to successful continuation of struggles.

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